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ABSTRACT

The Supervision of Assistants Program (SOAP) at Louisiana State University provides pre-teaching, ongoing, and post-teaching supervision for 20 teaching assistants assigned to 800-1000 undergraduate students of French at the beginning and intermediate levels. Almost all new teaching assistants are assigned a section of introductory French, observing a "model class" regularly, keeping regular but limited office hours, and attending their own classes. Supervision of teaching assistant activities includes information about test use, preparation for the first class meeting, discussion of teaching methods, micro-teaching assignments, and scheduling. Ongoing assistance concerning the course syllabus for each level, teaching assistant-supervisor meetings, and coordination of the use of audiovisual aids is offered through the semester. Evaluation of students, teaching assistants, and supervisors is also part of the program. Student evaluation is based on midterm and final examinations. Teaching assistants are evaluated by their supervisors, and if desired, by students. Evaluation by students is private. The supervisor is reviewed by his students and by the teaching assistants. The questions used in the evaluations are included. (MSE)

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SOAP: THE CONTINUING DRAMA OF SUPERVISION OF ASSISTANTS PROGRAM

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Although SOAP may be the hottest and most talked about new television program of the season, the continuing drama of Supervision of Assistants Program is just as interesting and exciting for those of us who are concerned about effective language teaching. Furthermore, this drama provides a challenging experience for the participants in such programs.

The cast of actors for our SOAP production includes about twenty newcomers in the roles of teaching assistants. These stars have relatively little or no experience in teaching or acting. We mention this because most of us agree that the language teacher who has the ability to act will probably be able to enhance his or her teaching effectiveness and will make language learning easier and more enjoyable for the students. In spite of their lack of experience, our stars do a fine job as teaching assistants even though their work is complicated by the fact that they are also graduate students with enormous demands on their time and energy. Further complications arise from the fact that no drama is complete without some of the ordeals and dilemmas of real life. Our program is no different and contains its share of marriages, pregnancies, rare ailments, mysterious disappearances and career decisions.

Our audience consists of from 800 to 1000 undergraduate students who comprise approximately 15 sections of French 1, 10 sections of French 51, the second semester course, and 10 sections of French 53, the intermediate course. Ours is largely a captive audience because the College of Arts and Sciences requires 13 hours of a foreign language.

Upon consideration of these things, it becomes evident why a program of this scope requires careful supervision and direction in all phases. First of all, we want to assure a well articulated program so that all students will be prepared for the next level course regardless of which teacher they had for the previous course. Furthermore these students expect to be treated fairly and graded through a uniform and equitable process. Close supervision of the evaluation process assures this and care is taken to keep records of all grades and major exams. Secondly, supervision is important because we want our assistants' teaching experience to be positive, rewarding and instructive. If they enjoy teaching, this enthusiasm usually spills over to the students, which in turn makes for a more successful learning experience.

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A coordinated program also serves to support and protect Teaching Assistants against the few students who may see graduate students as more vulnerable to procedural and grading protests than would be a regular faculty member. When Teaching Assistants are carrying out departmental policy, objectives and procedures, they can depend on a strong support system. Thirdly, a well-supervised program is to the department's advantage. Teaching Assistants represent the Department of Foreign Languages and the vast majority of French students will never have a teacher who is a member of the faculty. In fact, figures from 1974 indicated that 58% of the student credit hours in Foreign Languages were generated by graduate Teaching Assistants. There have been no significant changes over the past four years which would make an appreciable difference in this figure. Therefore, it is certainly in the best interest of the department to assure as much as possible that the Teaching Assistants are good ambassadors and are doing a good job in teaching these elementary and intermediate courses.

The direction and production of our program includes three phases: "Rehearsal," or pre-teaching supervision, "Lights, Camera, Action," or on-going supervision, and "Reviews and Critics," or post-teaching supervision.

And now it's Rehearsal Time! We certainly are not going to send our new actors on stage with no preparation, so we offer pre-teaching supervision. At the beginning of the Fall Semester, a one and one-half day workshop is held to ready the Graduate Teaching Assistants for their teaching assignments. The first half day workshop is held just for the new teaching assistants. At this time, we inform them of: the General Duties of Teaching Assistants; the Advanced Placement Test procedures, results, and adjustments; the specific assignments for the next afternoon's practice sessions. Each one is given a copy of the "Orientation Guide," and the information it contains is discussed. As a teaching assistant in French, one is responsible for teaching the class assigned, and for various administrative duties such as registration, rally day, group exams, etc. There is information presented on what to do if one cannot meet the class, and how to keep a roll book and why this is an important aspect of their teaching responsibilities.

In the fall semester, nearly all new Assistants are assigned a section of French I. One section in every course, taught by the supervisor, is designated as a demonstration class. The Assistant attends these model classes a minimum of three times a week for the first three weeks, once a week for the following three weeks, and periodically for the remainder of the semester. Usually, a beginning assistant has a tendency to maintain a very slow tempo, and by observing a model class, the assistant learns how to pace the class. Assistants are required to submit numerical averages and letter grades for approval to the supervisor before assigning the course grades on the official grade sheet. Each Assistant is requested to keep a minimum of two hours per week as office hours. Everyone is encouraged to maintain dignity and responsibility as an instructor in as well as outside the classroom. The Assistants are often not much older than their students, and if they get too friendly with students, it makes it more difficult to be objective when it comes to grading.

Students are expected to attend classes regularly, since their participation in classroom activity is included in the evaluation of their overall performance. The Assistant must make this clear to the class.

Information is given to the Assistants concerning what types of tests should be given, and what to include on the tests. Copies of old exams are available from the supervisor that can be used as a guideline. A carbon copy of the test must be turned in to the supervisor one week prior to the test date. The mid-semester exam and the final exam are departmentalized. All students take the same exam, at the same time and place.

The Assistant is prepared for the first class meeting with instructions to write on the board his name, the course number, the section number, the room number, the days of class meetings, the name of the textbook and writing manual to be used in the course, and to let the class know his office number and office hours. The grading system is explained to the students, as well as the course objectives and how they are to be implemented. A syllabus is prepared to give the Assistants an outline of the daily lesson plans for the semester.

Teaching methods are discussed, as the Assistants are expected to conduct the class in French. They learn the importance of active, vocal participation by the students. Guidelines for grading oral performance by the students are included in the Orientation Guide and there is even a section on the proper use of the blackboard which ends with the admonition to erase the board at the end of the class.

We go into such detail over information as "The First Class Meeting," and "How to Grade Oral Performance" not to be patronising, but because the new teaching assistants are very often insecure about these things, and they want as much help as possible.

After the discussion of the material in the "Orientation Guide," the new Assistants are given a demonstration on how to teach the French sound system to their students. This constitutes a part of each class for the first two weeks of the semester, and the Assistants will be given an opportunity to be involved in micro-teaching of the sound system on the second day of the workshop.

Assignments concerning the micro-teaching are made, and then the assistants go to the language lab to learn how it operates, and what to tell their students about how to use it. One of the biggest problems we have in getting the students to use the lab correctly is to get them to speak into the microphone so that they can hear themselves. They are reassured that no one else is listening to them. After the language lab demonstration, the Assistants work on the preparation of their assignment for the next day's micro-teaching.

On the second day of the workshop, both new and experienced teaching assistants meet and are welcomed by the chairman of the department. A description of that year's office routine is outlined by the secretary, and the assignments and responsibilities for that semester's registration are made. Then the new Assistants go to one room, and the experienced ones into another, to discuss micro-teaching assignments and to practice. In the afternoon, the Assistants are involved in the micro-teaching.

The "Class and Work Schedule" is given to the Assistants at the last meeting of the workshop; this must be returned to the supervisor by the morning of the last day of the walk-through registration, so that the teaching assignment time can be made. The Assistants indicate the hours when they are in class, and the hours when they cannot be available for teaching. Each semester there are approximately 35 sections of French, and 20 teaching assistants to be matched to those sections. We try to honor requests for certain teaching times, but usually everyone wants the same time. We really hate to lose one of our Ph.D. candidates who will be finishing this year. She is one of the few people to ever consistently request to teach a 7:30 a.m. class.

By the afternoon of the last day of registration, a copy of the class schedule is in the Assistants' mailboxes, and everyone is ready to begin teaching.

Once the Teaching Assistants are on stage and in action, they are not abandoned. On-going assistance and supervision is offered to our case throughout the semester. Three main aspects are the script, cast-director meetings and set direction.

The script for our cast is the course syllabus for each level of instruction. The syllabus indicates the material to be covered each day but it is up to each Teaching Assistant to organize it in the most effective and interesting manner and according to the needs of his or her particular class. On occasions the Teaching Assistants have experienced difficulty in organizing class time in order to cover all materials indicated on the syllabus. As a result we now include on the syllabus a suggested amount of time to be spent on each activity. Aside from providing these time suggestions, we also talk with them about class tempo and stress the importance of the instructor setting the tempo. A slow, drawn-out class can be terribly boring to all students.

Reminders to give quizzes also appear on the syllabus. Frequent testing encourages the students to keep up with the work on a daily basis. Although this means a lot of paper work for the instructor, we try to help out here by furnishing a file of quizzes on each grammar concept for those Teaching Assistants who are too busy to make up daily quizzes.

Assignments in the text, the writing manual and the language lab are also indicated. We have a very modern lab at LSU but it has one very unfortunate drawback. Students may not go in and request any tape they want. Only certain tapes are available each day. Therefore, the teacher must make an effort to keep up with the syllabus so that the students' lab work will correspond to the class work.

Reminders about the unit exams are included in the syllabus. Teaching Assistants are asked to turn in a carbon copy of their tests early enough so that it can be approved before it is typed. We ask for a carbon copy to keep on file. In the event that an instructor loses his or her copy of the test before it is typed, we can give them the extra copy from our files. Teaching Assistants are asked to alert students at least one week prior to the unit exam so that they have ample time to prepare. We offer a group make-up exam for all students who missed the regularly scheduled exam. This cuts down on the amount of time each instructor has to spend giving make-up work.

The second aspect of the on-going supervision is the cast-director (Teaching Assistants-Supervisors) meetings. For those teaching French I, the meetings take place weekly, but for the Teaching Assistants with more experience in teaching and planning, the meetings are less frequent. At these meetings, the Teaching Assistants have an opportunity to discuss any problems they may be having with their classes or the material, and they have a chance to share ideas on additional class activities. More effective ways of presenting difficult grammar concepts are explored, often including more micro-teaching in these areas, with Teaching Assistants and Supervisors getting into the act. The instructors' active participation at these meetings is encouraged because we all learn from one another and new teachers often have exciting and fresh ideas to share.

Another aspect of continuing supervision is what we call set-direction. Over the years we have built up a wealth of audio-visual aids designed to complement the texts we use in the various levels. We have appropriate slides, magazines, maps, cassette tapes and records. We also have felt board equipment, metro maps and tickets, telephone tokens, menus and many other realia. With 20 people using these items, coordination minimizes loss or abuse of materials. We also spend some time at meetings working with visual aids so that the Teaching Assistants feel more comfortable and skilled in their presentations.

No program can or should escape the reviews and the critics. Likewise, we have tried to develop a comprehensive evaluation of the three levels of our program. This includes evaluation of students, evaluation of Teaching Assistants and evaluation of the Supervisors and the Program.

Student evaluation at the departmental level consists of mid-term and final exams. These are also set up in such a way as to best serve all involved; students, Teaching Assistants, and the department. These exams are departmental exams and all students take the same exam at the same time. The process we use assures that all students will be tested fairly and adequately. It also calls for input from all Teaching Assistants but eliminates the necessity of any one instructor having to make out a complete exam. Each is only responsible for one section of the written group exam and 20 listening comprehension questions which are given during the class period prior to the exam. This is important because our graduate students need time to prepare for their own exams. Using this process, we do not make too many demands on them when they are already extremely busy.

The process begins about three weeks prior to exams. Teaching Assistants and supervisors meet to decide the format of the exam and who will be responsible for which test items. If, for example, there will be 10 questions on vocabulary, the person responsible for this section will submit 15 possible questions. When all Teaching Assistants have turned in their questions, the supervisors edit these to produce a final draft of the exam. We then allow several days for the Assistants to come by to look at the completed exam and to make further suggestions, corrections, and comments before the exams are taken to be duplicated.

The fact that we are testing so many students at one time necessitates certain precautions to minimize the chance of cheating. First of all, each class is given a specific seating assignment. On the day of the exam, the instructor can scan the students sitting in her section and easily determine if someone has sent a "stand-in" to take his exam. Next, specific instructions are given for administering the exam. Included is a warning about giving and receiving information and the consequences of this. It is university policy that this information be provided prior to all exams. Teaching Assistants monitor during the exam and they also make sure that exams are returned in an orderly fashion and that no exams leave the room. This is important because the exam given one semester may be used as a make-up exam the next semester.

It's not according to Cleveland Amory, Gene Shalit, John Updike, or Rona Barrett, but there are reviews of the teachers, too. The Teaching Assistant is observed by the supervisor at least once each semester, and then has a meeting with the supervisor to discuss the information contained in the evaluation report. The evaluation by the supervisor covers the Assistant's command of the language, the interaction between the Assistant and the class, how the Assistant teaches grammar, the strong points and the weak points of the Assistant, and an overall rating.

The Assistant is given an opportunity to get a review from the students. This is not mandatory, however. The Assistant is counseled to avail himself of the feedback

he can get from his class through some form of student evaluation. Most importantly, as far as the Assistant is concerned, no one else will see the results of the student evaluation. It is intended for improvement of instruction.

The students are requested to reply in writing to the questions:

1. Is this a required course for you?
2. How do you like it in comparison to other required courses outside your major field of concentration?
3. Was the material explained clearly?
4. Were effective examples and illustrations used?
5. Are exams representative of the material taught?
6. Do you feel at ease with, or alienated from the instructor? Why?
7. Is the instructor available for outside help and guidance?
8. Is the instructor courteous, tactful, fair towards the students?
9. What is the instructor's attitude towards the material?
10. What did you like most during the semester?
11. What did you like least?
12. How do you feel about the organization of class activities? (Monotonous, too fast, too slow, just right, etc.)
13. What suggestions would you make to improve this course?

Sometimes the students' attitudes are affected by whether or not the course is a required one. By the first two questions, we are able to determine how effective the course is for a student who has to take the course. We have included question number 9, which asks about the instructor's attitude towards the material, because this attitude influences the student's attitude about the course. When we point this out during the workshop, the Assistant does not always accept this. However, they often tell us after these evaluations that their students are sensitive to their attitude about the material.

Although this questionnaire is designed primarily to evaluate the teacher,

it also evaluates the program, and while only the individual administering the evaluation gets the results, we still get indirect feedback. The Teaching Assistants are quick to tell us if some of their students objected to or praised some part of the program.

The supervisor is reviewed by her students by use of the same student evaluation, and is reviewed by the Assistants through the "Evaluation of Elementary and Intermediate French Program" questionnaire which they turn in anonymously at the end of the semester. We ask them to circle the number which best indicates how they feel about the following questions. Number 5 is the highest rating and number 1 is the lowest; 0 indicates that no opinion has been formed.

1. When you began as a TA, were you informed adequately and specifically concerning your duties and responsibilities? 543210

2. Was observing more experienced teachers helpful? 543210

3. Were group meetings with supervisors beneficial? 543210

4. After the supervisor observed your class, did she give you specific and understandable suggestions for improvement? 543210

5. Do you feel that a fair evaluation of your teaching was made? 543210

6. Do you like the materials used in the courses you teach? 543210

This following section is to help the Assistant evaluate his/her own work. How would you rate yourself in the following areas?

7. Knowledge of subject matter. 543210

8. Knowledge of teaching methodologies. 543210

9. Ability to organize classroom presentations. 543210

10. Ability to write appropriate tests for your students. 543210

11. Dependability (Do you meet deadlines, attend meetings, notify early in case of absences, etc.) 543210

12. Wise use of time (Are you punctual for classes and meetings? Do you grade and return papers promptly? Do you neglect studies because of TA duties?) 543210

13. What methods do you consider the most effective in your teaching?

14. What methods do you consider the least effective in your teaching?

15. What do you consider the strengths of the French program?

16. What do you consider the weaknesses of the French program?

17. What suggestions do you have to improve the basic program in terms of student interest, performance and achievement?

18. List ways in which any of the following could help you to improve your teaching:

    Your Supervisor
    Other Faculty Members
    Office Staff

We have tried to answer any questions you may have had about a Supervision of Assistants Program, but many questions, of course, remain unanswered:

1. Will Mary be able to resist John's advances long enough to finish typing her French I exam by Tuesday's deadline?

2. Will the supervisor give Ellen an ultimatum to stop dating her students or relinquish her assistantship?

3. Will Mike be able to console Sarah about her career decisions?

4. Will the supervisors be prepared for ..... ?